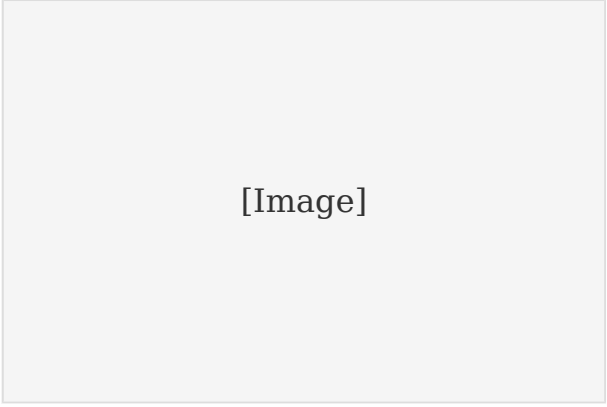
Did Charles Simpson's "Covenant Theology" Influence Sovereign Grace Ministries?

"Badness is only spoiled goodness." CS Lewis



The Shepherding Movement (aka Discipleship Movement), which began in the early 1970s, has proven to be one of the most destructive movements in recent church history. Bob Mumford (one of the Fort Lauderdale Five who is still living) has documented what transpired in an article entitled "The Five Teachers", which can be found on his website.

Mumford begins with these words:

"In 1971 we became officially involved with New Wine Magazine and Christian Growth Ministries in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. There was a sense that among the five of us – Derek Prince (Assemblies of God), Don Basham (Disciples of Christ), Ern Baxter (Charismatic), Charles Simpson (Southern Baptist) and myself (Pentecostal) – there would be a diversification of teaching which would provide a unique balance. The five of us did not realize how important our initial commitment was or where it would lead us. Although we were all very different in personality, ministry style and background, God gave a unity born of the Holy Spirit. Three of these anointed leaders – Don Basham, Ern Baxter and Derek Prince – have since gone to their eternal reward….Like many other movements, it blessed

and strengthened many, while injuring and disappointing others. The Fort Lauderdale Five disbanded in 1984."

Mumford then explains that he issued a sincere apology for the harm the Shepherding Movement. Here's what he has to say:

"In 1987, I wrote a national apology for the extremes and injuries that occurred, seeking to heal and restore the many that remained confused and concerned. This was well received by most and began to bring healing and reconciliation to many. However, the discipleship movement, travel, warfare and unrelenting pressures had taken its predictable toll on me personally…."

As you may remember from our article about Derek Prince, he issued a public apology about the harm caused by the Shepherding Movement. Has the other living member of the Fab Five ever issued a formal apology about Shepherding/Discipleship? Here's what we found in an article published in **Ministry Today Magazine.**

"Charles Simpson, who leads a major segment of those who continue in the legacy of the movement, has said that human carnality won out all too often. While many were hurt as some leaders improperly exercised spiritual authority, mostly ignored are those who benefited from the movement and those who continue in its varied expressions today.

The Covenant movement, led by Simpson, maintains a commitment to many of the Shepherding movement's founding principles of accountability, covenant relationship, spiritual fatherhood and spiritual family–principles they believe have matured and moderated over time."

Did you catch what Simpson said about the legacy of the Shepherding Movement? Let me repeat it for emphasis. "…mostly ignored are those who benefited from the movement and those who continue in its varied expressions today". Hmmm….. So the Shepherding Movement continues today in its "varied expressions"…

Dee and I began investigating Sovereign Grace Ministries in the Fall of 2008. We have been following two blogs – SGM Survivors and SGM Refuge – in order to learn about the abuses that are taking place within this "family of churches". On March 29, 2009 (TEN DAYS after our very first TWW post), someone published a

comment on SGM Survivors which stated:

"I was wondering whether anyone knows or can flesh out the history of SGM in PDI and its association with the "Discipleship" or "Shepherding" Movement. I am aware of this history but am interested in whether there is written (or web-based) information about it."

Kris, who moderates the blog, responded in comment #266, which you can find in the thread here:

"CJ Mahaney and Larry Tomczak (PDI's co-founders) definitely had associations with the so-called Ft. Lauderdale Five back in the day. From what I've learned, they participated in some of the same conferences back in the heyday of the shepherding movement. PDI came within a hair's breadth of succumbing to the gross errors of the shepherding movement, but somehow avoided the most dramatic stuff, like the mechanics of tithing to one's "upline" (true shepherding had members paying tithes to their overseers, who in turn paid tithes to THEIR overseers, and so on). The Gothardite and shepherding concept of "umbrellas of authority" became embedded deep into PDI's culture…If you search online for information about the "Ft. Lauderdale Five" and some of the key names from that movement, you will discover more information about what the shepherding movement stood for…and then you can see how such a movement dovetailed rather well with the sort of small group model that PDI was built upon, as well as what CJ Mahaney continues to teach about obeying one's authorities."

I was actively reading this thread two years ago and began wondering whether the horror stories that current and former SGMers shared were the result of abusive shepherding tactics. A few comments later, I read this:

"Charles Simpson, one of the founders of the Shepherding Movement, spoke at several Celebration East conferences as late as the 1990s. At that time he appeared to still believe in some form of Shepherding…"

As soon as I read that comment I theorized that Sovereign Grace Ministries (then PDI) must be one of the "varied expressions" of the Shepherding Movement that Charles Simpson mentioned in the Ministry Today Magazine article. I surmised that Charles Simpson must have "discipled" Mahaney and Tomczak in Covenant

Theology, which they appear to have implemented in their Care Groups.

Dr. Steven Lambert has done extensive research on the Shepherding Movement, and his article “Charismatic Captivation” has been an excellent resource. You can find it here.

This is what Dr. Lambert had to say about Charles Simpson’s position on Shepherding (now called “Covenant Relationships” or “Covenant Theology” by Simpson):

“At present, of the original Fab Five, apparently only Simpson continues to stubbornly refuse to renounce and repent from the heretical Discipleship principles and practices. Simpson's admitted intransigence and explicit refusal to acknowledge the erroneousness of Discipleship teaching is reflected in the aforementioned Charisma & Christian Life article reporting Mumford's recantation:
Charles Simpson told Charisma that he supports Mumford's statement as it stands in that it comes from Mumford. But he warns against too much analysis and against dismissing discipleship principles as a result of this. Ern Baxter declined to comment about Mumford's statement.

Simpson said "individual actions" did need to be righted. "I have done things that I repent of and I do want forgiveness and I do want to see restoration," he said. "I say with Moses, who in Numbers 11 said, 'Lord, let me not see my wretchedness.' I think I have seen some of mine."

"*My problem is not repenting; my problem is to continue leading....*"

Simpson said he still believes in and teaches covenant relationships. "*That's the only qualification," he said. "I put no qualifications on the fact that I did things wrong. But I CANNOT RENOUNCE all of the [covenant] relationships I have.* ***I CANNOT DO THAT*** *as a matter of* ***CONSCIENCE****." ”*

Unfortunately, after the Fort Lauderdale Five split up due to the carnage from their abusive movement, shepherding went underground. I fear that the Shepherding Movement has reared its ugly head in PDI (now SGM). I am grieved for all the victims who appear to have suffered at the hands of abusive leadership

in Sovereign Grace Ministries.

I am encouraged that one Christian leader may FINALLY be waking up and speaking out against abusive shepherding tactics. There is a pastor in Fort Lauderdale (of all places!) whom we have previously criticized that appears to be "getting it". Tullian Tchividjian, D. James Kennedy's successor at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, recently wrote an interesting blog post entitled: **"Reminders Are More Effective Than Rebukes",** which you can read here.

He begins the post as follows:

"Are you tired of being told that if you're really serious about God, you must be in an "accountability group?" You know the ones I'm talking about. The ones where you and a small group of "friends" arrange for a time each week to get together and pick each other apart–uncovering layer after layer after layer of sin? The ones where all parties involved believe that the guiltier we feel the more holy we are? The ones where you confess your sin to your friends but it's never enough? No matter what you unveil, they're always looking for you to uncover something deeper, darker, and more embarrassing than what you've fessed up to. It's usually done with such persistent invasion that you get the feeling they're desperately looking for something in you that will make them feel better about themselves.

Well, I hate those groups!"

Tchividjian then gets to the point of his post by writing:

"The real reason, however, that I hate the kind of "accountability groups" described above is because the primary (almost exclusive, in my experience) focus is always on our sin, not on our Savior. Because of this, these groups breed self-righteousness, guilt, and the almost irresistible temptation to pretend–to be less than honest. I can't tell you how many times I've been in "accountability groups" where there has been little to no attention given to the gospel whatsoever. There's no reminder of what Christ has done for our sin–"cleansing us from its guilt and power"–and the resources that are already ours by virtue of our union with him. These groups produce a "do more, try harder" moralism that robs us of the joy and freedom Jesus paid dearly to secure for us. They start with the narcissistic

presupposition that Christianity is all about cleaning up and getting better–it's all about personal improvement."

I especially appreciated this "observation" (SGM lingo for pointing out someone's sin) that Tchividjian also made in his February , 2011, post.

"Christianity is not first about our getting better, our obedience, our behavior, and our daily victory over remaining sin – as important as all these are. It's first about Jesus! It's about his person and subsitutionary work – his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, session, and promised return."

I hope Tullian's reformed buddies, Josh Harris and C.J. Mahaney, are taking notes…

Lydia's Corner: Numbers 22:21-23:30 Luke 1:57-80 Psalm 58:1-11 Proverbs 11:12-13

Original Link:
https://thewartburgwatch.com/2011/02/18/did-charles-simpson%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Ccovenant-theology%E2%80%9D-influence-sovereign-grace-ministries/